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ABSTRACT

The Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 1 in 1990, which gave all school districts the option to offer prekindergarten programs for 3-year-old disadvantaged children. The financial feasibility of implementing such programs in the Texas public schools is analyzed in this report. A brief review of the economic impact of program implementation concludes that the addition of new prekindergarten programs during a time of severe revenue shortfall and an uncertain rise in revenue costs for an equitable school funding plan constitutes an unsound financial decision. The recommendation is made to improve the current program for 4-year-olds, which will have the following benefits: raise the enrollment of eligible 4-year-olds; reduce the pupil-teacher ratio; and decrease the dropout rate. Other alternatives include private day care and nursery schools, expanded Head Start programs, and private industry. (12 references) (LMI)

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IS IT FINANCIALLY FEASIBLE FOR TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO IMPLEMENT THE PREKINDERGARTEN THREE-YEAR-OLD PROGRAM?

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IS IT FINANCIALLY FEASIBLE FOR TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO IMPLEMENT THE PREKINDERGARTEN THREE-YEAR-OLD PROGRAM?

I. Issue

The 71st Texas Legislature established two-year pilot programs for prekindergarten three-year-olds during the 1989-90 school year in nine school districts.[1] In the summer of 1990, Texas passed Senate Bill 1 which gave all school districts of Texas the option of offering prekindergarten three-year-old programs for disadvantaged children, beginning in 1991-92.[2]

Appropriations by previous Texas legislatures have not always been sufficient to fund approved programs. In fact, Texas school districts have been informed of the proration of funding which would occur in the 1990-91 school year. The 72nd Texas Legislature has been faced with a revenue shortfall projected at $4 billion to $5 billion for the next two years and a Texas Supreme Court order to enact an equitable plan for financing public education.[3] It has been estimated that any plan approved by the Legislature to meet the court order would increase property taxes by 32 percent over the next five years and cost taxpayers $13.9 billion in state and local revenues.[4] Considering the Texas Legislature's past record of mandates without adequate funding and the current status of public school finance in Texas, is it financially feasible for Texas public schools to implement the prekindergarten three-year-old program? If the Legislature insists on spending more money on prekindergarten, could this money be better spent to strengthen the four-year-old program?

II. Points of View

The demand for preschool programs has increased as the population of this age group and the number of mothers working outside the home has increased. The Bureau of the Census indicated that the national population of three- to five-year olds had risen to 10.6 million in 1984.[5] The number of children under six was expected to reach 23 million by 1990.[6] In 1986, nearly 60 percent of U. S. mothers with children between the ages of three and five worked outside the home.[7] It is now estimated that 75 percent of women who have children under five work outside the home.[8]

In 1985, the High/Scope Foundation estimated that it would cost $2.5 billion to provide high-quality preschool programs to the estimated 731,000 poor four-year-olds in the United States; and with the number of families at the poverty level increasing yearly, the cost would continue to grow for any programs for disadvantaged preschoolers.[9]

Studies have indicated academic advantages to preschool programs, and the benefit cost analysis of the Perry Preschool Program indicated a definite economic advantage for children in a preschool program in terms of benefits to society, to participants, and to taxpayers.[10]

The cost of implementing a prekindergarten three-year-old program would require expenditures for special training for the teachers, teacher salaries and benefits, materials and supplies, transportation, and classrooms.

When the 71st Texas Legislature appropriated $1 million for a two-year pilot program for disadvantaged prekindergarten three-year-olds,

school districts applied competitively for this funding and nine districts were awarded these pilot funds.[11] The nine districts designed programs to serve approximately 525 students.[12] The two-year programs began in January of the 1989-90 school year.[13]

A cost survey on seven of the nine programs in the first interim report of these programs showed a median annual operating cost of $2,670 per pupil, with a median startup cost of $522 per pupil.[14]

In a recent study of early childhood programs in Texas, a majority of the school districts (70 percent) indicated they did not have available space to accommodate a three-year-old program.[15] If 70 percent of the school districts constructed one classroom at $40,000, it would cost $29,600,000 (740 x $40,000); some districts would need more than one.

One teacher hired for a prekindergarten three-year-old program at $20,000 per teacher for each of the 1,057 school districts in Texas would cost $21,140,000, not including costs of other benefits associated with hiring a teacher. The pupil-teacher ratio may dictate additional teachers and/or teacher aides.

Any district that needed to expand its transportation capability to accommodate this program would have to spend approximately $35,000 for each additional bus required, plus operational expenses and bus driver salary/benefits.[16]

Based on the startup costs of $522 per pupil in the pilot program, the cost to each district serving ten children would be $5,517,540 (10,570 x $522). In the pilot program, 43 percent of the startup costs went to consumable supplies and 47 percent went to equipment.[17]

An unexpected problem was encountered in recruiting sufficient numbers of three-year-olds for the pilot programs.[18] The first interim report on these programs indicated the attendance rate was 78 percent, with a drop-out rate of almost one in six.[19] If these rates remained the same for future programs, and if parents continued to be reluctant to send three-year-olds to school, the result could be a large investment in a program that proved to be financially unfeasible because of enrollment and attendance.

In a recent survey of Texas school districts, 78 percent stated that there were other priorities in their districts which would receive financial precedence over funding this program. Sixty-two percent would prefer to use funding to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio in prekindergarten four-year-old programs in lieu of implementing prekindergarten three-year-old programs.[20]

III. Personal Opinion

There is enough evidence available to say that it is not financially feasible to implement the prekindergarten three-year-old program in Texas public schools. Adding new prekindergarten programs while facing a revenue shortfall of several billion dollars and an uncertain increase in revenue costs for an equitable school funding plan to meet the Texas Supreme Court's order is not a sound financial decision. If the Legislature insists on spending more money on prekindergarten, spending it to improve the current four-year-old programs would benefit districts in the following ways:

1. Increase the percent of eligible four-year-olds enrolled.

Approximately one-third of the districts recently surveyed indicated they were serving less than 50 percent of eligible four-year-olds in their districts.[21]

2. Reduce the pupil-teacher ratio. Sixty-three percent of the districts surveyed had a pupil-teacher ratio of 18:1 or higher (35 percent were at 22:1).[22] However, 76 percent of the districts indicated that 15:1 or less should be the maximum pupil-teacher ratio in this program.[23]

3. Decrease the drop-out rate. An assumption is made that a lack of transportation would affect this for disadvantaged families. Providing transportation both ways for this program may decrease the drop-out rate of the four-year-old programs, as well as increase attendance.

Before further adding to the responsibility and cost of public education, other alternatives for prekindergarten programs should be explored. One alternative would be private day-care and nursery school programs where the employees are less expensive than certified teachers. Another alternative would be the expansion of Head Start programs. In 1990, Congress appropriated $2.5 billion for child care block grants to help pay for child care or to increase the supply or quality of care, with Texas receiving $57.5 million. The Earned Income Tax Credit for child care to benefit poor working families who need child care programs has also been expanded.[24] Private industry could also be encouraged to expand on providing child care services for its employees.

Whether or not the prekindergarten three-year-old program will be

fully implemented in Texas public schools will not be based on academic merit, but on financial feasibility.

NOTES

[1]Statement by Angelica Gayton, official of Texas Education Agency: Discretionary Funding, telephone interview, Austin, Texas, January 30, 1991.

[2]Jerry C. McGee, Laverne Warner, and David L. Henderson, "A Study of Early Childhood Programs and Program Readiness in the Texas Public Schools, Ages Three Through Five," (Huntsville, Texas: Sam Houston State University, January, 1991), p. 2. (Mimeographed.)

[3]Dwight Silverman and Clay Robison, "Legislators Willing to Consider State Income Tax, Survey Shows," Houston Chronicle, March 10, 1991, Sec. A, p. 20, col. 1.

[4]Mary Lenz, "Property Taxes Would Climb 32% with Senate School Bill," The Houston Post, March 27, 1991, Sec. A, p. 1, col. 4.

[5]W. Vance Grant, "Enrollment of 3-, 4-, and 5-Year Olds in Preprimary Programs," American Education, 21, No. 3 (1985), 16.

[6]Kathleen McCormick, "If Early Childhood Isn't on Your Agenda Now, It Could Be--and Soon," The American School Board Journal, 173, No. 6 (June 1986), 30.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Address by Pat Koppman, former president of International Reading Association, ("Challenging a New Decade in Reading") at the Texas State Reading Association Conference, Austin, March 8, 1990 (report available from Texas State Reading Association).

[9]McCormick, op. cit., p. 34.

[10]W. Steven Barnett, "Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Perry Preschool Program and Its Policy Implications," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 7, No. 4 (Winter 1985), 339.

[11]Statement by Erin Martin, official of Texas Education Agency: Discretionary Funding, telephone interview, Austin, Texas, January 30, 1991.

[12]Texas Education Agency, Division of Special Programs Planning and Implementation, "Pilot Prekindergarten Program for Three-Year-Olds" (Austin: Texas Education Agency, December, 1989). (Mimeographed.)

[13]Texas Education Agency, Division of Planning Coordination and the Division of Program Evaluation, Department of Research and Development, "Expanding the Boundaries of School: Pilot Programs Established by the 71st Texas Legislature" (Austin: Texas Education Agency, January, 1991, p. 11. (Mimeographed.)

[14]Ibid., p. 12.

[15]Jerry C. McGee, Laverne Warner, and David L. Henderson, "A Study of Early Childhood Programs and Program Readiness in the Texas Public Schools, Ages Three Through Five," (Huntsville, Texas: Sam Houston State University, January, 1991, p. 3. (Mimeographed.)

[16]Statement by John Bramlett, transportation director of Magnolia Independent School District, personal interview, Magnolia, Texas, March 27, 1991.

[17]Texas Education Agency: Division of Planning Coordination and the Division of Program Evaluation, Department of Research and Development, "Expanding the Boundaries of School: Pilot Programs Established by the 71st Texas Legislature" (Austin: Texas Education Agency, January, 1991), p. 13. (Mimeographed.)

[18]Ibid., p. 14.

[19]Ibid., p. 12.

[20]Beverly Robison, "Prekindergarten Three-Year-Old and Four-Year-Old Questionnaire" (Magnolia, Texas, February, 1991). (Mimeographed.)

[21]McGee, op. cit., p. 2.

[22]Robison, loc. cit.

[23]McGee, op. cit., p. 4.

[24]Elizabeth F. Shores, ed. "New Federal Child Care Block Grants Will Funnel $250 M to South Next Year," SACUS Reporter, Fall 1990, pp. 1-2, cols. 1-4.

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